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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8311
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RHMFIUU/COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE
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SUBJECT: "WAHHABIS" AND ISLAM IN MALI

REF: A. IIR 7 114 0005 08

[1](#)B. BAMAKO 01170

[1](#)C. BAMAKO 00789

[1](#)1. Summary: Some external observers have become increasingly concerned over a segment of Malian Muslims frequently described as "Wahhabi" (ref A), fearing that those so labeled are likely to advance a radical agenda. This concern stems from confusion, rooted in expedient if inaccurate labels dating from as early as the French colonial era, within Malian society over what the term Wahhabi means. Such labels should not be interpreted as evidence of an ideological link between Malian "Wahhabis" and Islamic extremists. In Mali those who pray with crossed arms and veil female family members are frequently called Wahhabi. This group, which refers to itself as "ahl al-Sunna," does not follow Wahhabi doctrine and has little, if anything, in common with traditional Wahhabism. Understanding why this is so, and what differentiates the al-Sunna from Mali's Sufi majority, will improve our ability to reach out to Malian Muslims. Al-Sunna in Bamako, Gao, Timbuktu and western Mali freely shared views on Sharia law, treatment of women, assistance from Saudi Arabia and other issues. In nearly all respects these views proved identical to those expressed by Malian Sufis who are known for practicing a tolerant and open form of Islam. Rather than posing a threat as the Wahhabi label implies, the al-Sunna respect the secular institutions of the Malian state, express tolerance for other religious traditions and have lived peacefully in Mali for more than 60 years - something that is unlikely to change in the near future. End Summary.

Islamic Practices in Mali

[1](#)2. Nearly all Muslims in Mali are Malikite Sunnis, meaning they follow the Maliki school of Islamic law. Most of these adhere to one of three Malikite Sunni Sufi brotherhoods: the Quadriyya, Tijaniyya or Hamalliyya (ref B). A significant number of Malian Sunnis, however, explicitly reject Sufi doctrine. Although this group refers to itself as "ahl al-Sunna" or "the people of the Sunna," Malians describe them as "Wahhabi."

[1](#)3. Malian al-Sunna, however, have little if anything in common with traditional Wahhabis. They do not practice Wahhabi doctrine and do not follow Mohammed abd al-Wahab. More importantly, the al-Sunna do not adhere to the Hanbali legal tradition - a key trait that characterizes Wahhabism. Abdoul Aziz Yattabare, an al-Sunna Imam who directs one of the largest medersas in Bamako, described all al-Sunna in Mali as Malikite. Two other well-known al-Sunna Imams,

Mahamoud Dicko and Mohamed Kimbiri, were hesitant to state categorically that every al-Sunna in Mali was Malikite but agreed that Yattabare's assessment was largely correct. Kimbiri, for instance, joked that he was "more Malikite" than his Malikite Sufi colleagues. Dicko noted that in Mali like anywhere else one can find Muslims who borrow from all four classic Sunni traditions - Maliki, Hanbali, Shafi and Hanafi - but that Malian al-Sunna are generally Malikite.

14. Al-Sunna live throughout Mali and come from a diverse set of ethnic backgrounds including Songhai, Bambara, Malinke, Soninke, Sarakole and Peuhl. While it is relatively easy to find al-Sunna in Mali's northern regions of Timbuktu and Gao, most of the al-Sunna living in these areas appear to be either Songhai or from southern Mali origins. Al-Sunna is noticeably less popular among northern Mali's Arab and Tuareg populations. There are very few al-Sunna, for instance, in the northernmost region of Kidal, which largely adheres to the Sufi Quadriyya brotherhood.

Al-Sunna Influence in Mali

15. Al-Sunna have been in Mali since the 1940s when students returning from universities in Egypt and the Arabian peninsula brought with them new religious interpretations that rejected key Sufi tenets such as the worship of Muslim saints, mysticism and initiation rites. The rejection of the core values of popular Sufi brotherhoods was part of a broader attempt to return to "true" Islam based on strict adherence to the Koran. Although these students were familiar with Wahhabi doctrine, they never regarded themselves as Wahhabi nor followed Wahhabism's key tenets.

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They were, moreover, not adverse to incorporating modern or western ideas deemed compatible with Sunni Islam.

16. French colonial authorities were extremely concerned by political Islam and religious extremism during the decades prior to Malian independence. In the 1930s, these fears focused on the Hamalliyya and Shaykh Hamallah in the western Malian town of Niore du Sahel (ref B). After Shaykh Hamallah's deportation to a French POW camp during WWII and subsequent death, the French turned their sights on Malians returning from the Middle East whom the French branded as Wahhabis. Several French colonial administrators serving in West Africa at the time noted that the traditional definition of Wahhabism did not fit the form of Islam practiced by Malian "Wahhabis," but these observations were overwhelmed by the political expediency of saddling the new religious movement with a label linked to backwardness and Islamic extremism.

17. Nor were the French the only ones working to discredit Malians returning from Egypt and the Middle East. Because this group explicitly rejected Mali's traditional Sufi practices as misguided, prominent Malian religious and political leaders interpreted the form of Islam they practiced as an existential threat and joined the French in portraying them as radical, dangerous extremists.

We Are Not Extremists

18. Malian al-Sunna still chafe at the Wahhabi label since they do not regard themselves as Wahhabi and have little, if anything, in common with Wahhabis from the Middle East. In Mali the term has also served as a pejorative since the colonial era and is still invoked, often for domestic political reasons, to portray the al-Sunna as peddlers of foreign extremism.

19. With only a few exceptions, the al-Sunna are now fully

integrated into Malian society. In Bamako, Sikasso, Gao and Timbuktu al-Sunna leaders work closely with Sufis and hold respected posts within organizations like Mali's High Council of Islam. Al-Sunna Imams actively participate in an inter-faith religious organization dedicated to combating the spread of HIV/AIDS. Imams Yattabare and Dicko pointed to al-Sunna involvement in the Malian economy - many of Mali's most important economic operators are reportedly al-Sunna as are a good proportion of small-time vendors working in the informal sector - to emphasize how al-Sunna are working to reinforce Mali's secular institutions. Al-Sunna are also deeply involved in Mali's education sector as medersa teachers and administrators - something that cannot be overlooked in a nation short on teachers, schools and education infrastructure.

¶10. Imam Yattabare urged Malians and the international community not to lump the al-Sunna together with the Wahhabi or other extremist groups. "Muslims are brothers," said Yattabare, "but our understanding and world-views are not the same. Our perspective in Mali is different than those in the Middle East or even in South Africa. Failure to make this difference will create unintended misunderstandings. Malian al-Sunna are peaceful."

¶11. Unfortunately, many still fail to make this distinction. Imam Mahamoud Dicko, who directs Mali's Islamic radio station from a studio co-located with Bamako's Grand Mosque and Islamic Cultural Center, is one example. Dicko attracted significant attention in 2001 after he was quoted in the international press criticizing former Malian President Alpha Oumar Konare's pro-U.S. ties. By 2006, these comments surfaced in an article in the U.S. Army journal Military Review which described Dicko as the leader of a "harder, more militant form of Islamic politics (that) has appeared recently" in Bamako. "Coupled with the GSPC's appearance in the Sahel," the article continued, "Dicko's anti-U.S. campaign might inspire groups like the Tuaregs...to throw their lot in with the jihadists."

¶12. While Dicko is known for his outspokenness, he is certainly not the leader of an anti-American campaign. His criticism of former President Konare and current President Amadou Toumani Toure centers around his belief that Malian political leaders are more responsive to the demands of the international donor community than to the needs of average Malians who lack food, clean water, health care and

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educational opportunities. Opposition leaders, said Dicko, will not openly criticize the government because they still hold out hope for a government portfolio. "Me," he said, "I am an Imam. I don't need a portfolio."

¶13. Characterizing al-Sunna as a recently arrived, "harder, more militant" form of Islam is incorrect. Al-Sunna have lived peacefully in Mali for more than 60 years and there is no indication that this is likely to change. Dicko, other Al-Sunna Imams and simple adherents throughout the country appear as committed to Mali's tradition of religious tolerance as their Sufi counterparts. Indeed, some al-Sunna may be more committed to religious tolerance in Mali due to the marginalization they have experienced because of their religious beliefs.

Sharia Law

¶14. Doctrinal differences aside, Mali's al-Sunna and Sufi communities have nearly identical positions on social and political issues. This includes Sharia law, treatment of women, respect for the secular Malian state and tolerance of other religious practices. Although Sufi and al-Sunna leaders frequently refer to Sharia law, they admit it can be difficult to understand exactly what these references mean.

Imam Dicko himself said he has difficulty defining Sharia in the Malian context. "Sharia," he asked, "what is it? In a country where people don't have enough food to eat or water to drink, how are you going to amputate someone's hand?" Dicko easily dismissed aspects of Sharia not compatible with Malian realities - something a fundamentalist Islamic leader is unlikely to do. Malian references to Sharia appear designed rather to encourage individual Muslims to adhere to Islamic principles during their daily lives.

¶15. Al-Sunna and Sufi leaders also oppose a new Family Code Law and abolition of the death penalty, two controversial bills which President Amadou Toumani Toure recently asked the National Assembly to approve. Although the proposed Family Code amendments appear minor to outsiders - the changes would allow women to officially register as Head of Household, equalize inheritance rights for women, and enable children not recognized by their father to use the last name of their mother - Sufi and al-Sunna leaders describe the changes as un-Islamic and are united in their opposition. "In Islam," said one al-Sunna Imam, "only men can be Head of Household." Al-Sunna and Sufi Imams also oppose abolition of the death penalty. The only clear point of divergence between the two religious communities appears to center around the extent to which women are veiled. Sufi leaders advise that women's heads should be covered while the al-Sunna advocate a full veil which, in some extreme cases, includes a burqha complete with black gloves.

Saudi Funding, Or Lack Thereof

¶16. Al-Sunna leaders also discussed Saudi funding, or the lack thereof. It is commonly believed that Malians who convert to al-Sunna do so after traveling to Egypt or the Middle East. This was certainly the case for the first Malian al-Sunna and still holds for some al-Sunna today. Many Malian al-Sunna, however, converted while working in Central or Southern Africa where they met other Malian al-Sunna living abroad. Consequently, most funding for al-Sunna mosques and medersas appears to come not from Saudi Arabia but from Malians based abroad (in Africa, Europe or the Middle East).

¶17. In Gao, Timbuktu, and Bamako, al-Sunna Imams described Saudi funding as focused only on seed money for start-up projects or absent altogether. In Gao, the leaders of an isolationist al-Sunna village (often described by outsiders as a hot-bed of strong Wahhabi sentiment) complained that a water pump installed by Saudi Arabia, complete with a flapping Saudi flag on top, broke down every three months (ref C). Village leaders harbored no expectations of a Saudi-based repair initiative. In Timbuktu, the Imam of an impressive al-Sunna mosque-medersa complex in the sand on the edge of town received funding not from Saudi Arabia but from private Malians based abroad. The Imam expressed little hope for future Saudi funding. In Bamako Imam Yattabare, the Director of one of Mali's largest medersas, said his school was built with donations from private Malians and received no

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support from Saudi Arabia. He said al-Sunna regarded Saudi funding as fleeting with no follow-up.

¶18. Imam Dicko was even more outspoken on Saudi support for Malian al-Sunna. Dicko complained that Mali's Islamic Radio station has received nothing from Saudi Arabia despite a personal visit from Mecca's Grand Imam to the radio station during the 1990s. "The Saudis," said Dicko, "prefer to spend their money in nightclubs and casinos."

Comment: Recalibrating the View of Malian "Wahhabis"

¶19. As in most countries, prudence dictates that one can not dismiss the possibility that Islamic extremism, or the potential for it, exists in Mali. It is important, however, to clarify the outlook of a significant group of Malian Muslims, routinely described as Wahhabi. Contrary to popular belief, the al-Sunna are not a new phenomenon in Mali. Nor are they inherently anti-American or extremist. Apart from the doctrinal differences that separate them from Malian Sufis, the al-Sunna's opinions on issues like Islamic law, the treatment of women and religious tolerance are extremely close, and in many cases indistinguishable, from their Sufi counterparts and fall well within the Malian mainstream. Understanding this, and contextual undercurrents attached to the Wahhabi label in Mali, will strengthen our ability to work with al-Sunna leaders to better focus our outreach strategies in Mali.

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